

Proper 14 Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Have you ever walked into the middle of an argument between two other people and felt like you weren't getting the whole story? Maybe you came home to your kids arguing over who dented the car, or maybe you came across two co-workers who each blamed the other for mis-scheduling a meeting. That's basically the situation we're put into in today's Old Testament reading. In it we are told of Joseph's brothers and how they planned on killing him. Luckily the oldest brother, Reuben, takes pity on Joseph and convinces the other brothers to throw Joseph into a pit rather than murdering him outright. Though Reuben had planned on rescuing Joseph from the pit, when some Midianite traders passed by the brothers took that opportunity to sell Joseph into slavery. That way they were able to get rid of Joseph without having to resort to killing him themselves AND they were able to make a bit of money on the side.

Now our previous weeks' Old Testament readings have not told the story of Joseph and his brothers, and why Joseph's brothers hated him so much that they wanted to kill him. We're given a glimpse of what caused his brothers' hostility towards him—we are told that Joseph was Jacob's (also known as Israel)'s most beloved child. And because of this, his brothers resented him. However, there is more to the story. You may have noticed in today's readings, when Joseph's brothers see him approaching they say, "Here comes this dreamer." This wasn't just a random saying or insult. In the missing hunk of Genesis that we didn't read today, Joseph has two dreams. In the first, he and his brothers are binding sheaves of grain, when suddenly the sheaves stand up, and the brother's sheaves bow down to Joseph's sheaf. Joseph then has a dream that the sun, moon, and eleven stars bow down to him. Joseph's brothers don't appreciate Joseph implying that they will one day bow down to him, and so they begin to resent him even more. Not only was Joseph their father's favorite, he was now trying to elevate himself above his brothers.

So even though we kind of got dropped into the middle of a sibling rivalry, when we know the facts we can understand the animosity a bit better. Joseph's brothers resented Joseph to the point that they wanted to kill him—not only because he was his father's favorite, but also because Joseph was making himself out to be better than his brothers by telling them of these dreams he was having. So when we understand the background story, it's easier for us to understand why Joseph and his brothers did not get along. And we may even be able to understand why Joseph's brothers hated him so much that they'd want to kill him. But more important than understanding the brother's motivations for hating Joseph, is understanding how this story acts as a cautionary tale for all of us.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is a story of what happens when we allow anger or resentment towards someone else to fester—how staying secluded in a bubble with people who share our feelings of anger can lead us to commit evil acts. Joseph's brothers, understandably, resented Joseph because of his special status in their father's eyes and his arrogance. However, how they dealt with that resentment is inexcusable. They whispered among themselves, tearing down Joseph and feeding each other's ill-will. They excluded Joseph, refusing to work or speak with him. And they eventually plotted against Joseph, convincing themselves that they were justified in wanting him dead. The brother's fed their anger and allowed it to grow to the point that they were not only willing to murder Joseph, but felt that their actions were appropriate. Allowing our hatred and resentment against others to fester sets us on a slippery slope that leads to sin—perhaps the worst kind of sin as we discussed last week—the kind of sin where we don't even recognize that what we are doing is wrong—or worse, when we think that our evil actions are the right thing to do.

And unfortunately, this kind of situation does not only exist in long-bygone biblical stories. The tendency for people to allow anger to build into something more sinister exists even today. It's this kind of festering that, when left unchecked, can lead to unspeakable acts, like the murder of George Jennings in West Chester last week, who was shot and killed by his own neighbor after a long running dispute of

some kind. It's this kind of hate that inspires white supremacists to attack counterprotesters in Charlottesville Virginia, driving a car through a crowd killing a young woman and injuring 19 others. Though it's true that most people do not allow their anger to get so out-of-hand that they would consider taking someone's life, there are still ways in which many, if not all of us, allow our anger or hate to lead us to do wrong.

Has your prejudgement of others ever led you to exclude or ignore someone? Has your resentment of others ever led you to speak negatively behind someone's back, causing other people to also view them in a negative light? Have you ever allowed your anger towards someone to prevent you from helping them when they were genuinely in need? Though we may think to ourselves, "well that person deserved it," the actions of others does not change our responsibility to act as good Christians—to turn the other cheek.

Though Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, he eventually becomes a very powerful man in Egypt—so powerful that when a famine strikes the land it is Joseph who is put in charge of distributing food to the hungry people. Eventually Joseph's brothers come to him (not knowing who he is) in order to get food to feed to their family. It would be understandable, considering his brothers had sold him after first planning on killing him, that Joseph would seek revenge—that he would use his position of power to condemn the brothers who had wronged him to death. But that is not what Joseph does. He is wary of his brothers at first, but still helps them. He gives them all the food they need to feed their families without even accepting their payment. As we will hear in next week's reading, after his brothers come a second time for food, Joseph finally reveals himself to them, and explains that he doesn't hold anything against them for what they have done. Joseph had much better reasons than his brothers to seek revenge. While Joseph was his father's favorite and angered his brothers with his arrogant dreams, Joseph's brothers actually plotted to kill him—and they successfully sold him into slavery. But Joseph does not seek revenge. Instead, he offers his brothers nearby land and all the food they will need to sustain themselves throughout the famine.

So how are we, as Christians, supposed to react when we feel anger or resentment? Jesus tells us in the book of Matthew. "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment...So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift." Rather than allowing anger to fester, we are to speak to one another in love—to seek to reconcile with those whom we are angry with, who we resent for whatever reason. This is actually the original purpose of the Peace during our liturgy—not to chat with one another a bit, but to reconcile with anyone in the congregation whom we are angry with before coming to the altar for communion.

It can be very tempting to hold on to our anger and resentment—and to allow our anger and resentment to dictate our actions towards others. It can be very tempting to justify treating others badly, pointing out the reasons for our anger and considering ourselves to be in the right. But the stories of Joseph and his brothers, of the neighbors in West Chester, and of the violence in Charlottesville show us how allowing our hate to fester, by speaking badly about others behind their backs and keeping a circle of friends who only help fuel our anger, can lead us down evil paths. Let us instead follow the commandment of Christ, and seek understanding in the face of anger rather than revenge. Let us not allow anger or resentment to dictate our actions, but the love of Christ. And let us remember that our disputes here on earth amount to nothing in the face of the glory that will be in the world to come. Amen.